THE
Dark
Issue 3
FORGED ALIBI

An Ovi Publication

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editorial

There is a certain territory where the neon-soaked streets of noir fiction bleed into the realm of things that cannot be explained. It is a space occupied by private eyes who have seen too much, and by the ghosts that seem to follow them home.

With the third issue of Ovi Dark we plant our flag firmly in that territory, delivering a potent cocktail of supernatural dread and hard-boiled crime fiction that we believe sets a new standard for the genre.

For this issue, we challenged our contributors to find the humanity in the darkness. The result is a collection of original short stories that do not simply rely on jump scares or cheap thrills, but instead probe the psychological depths of their characters. We follow detectives whose cases lead them not just to killers but to doorways of the supernatural. We walk alongside protagonists whose moral compasses

are shattered by encounters with forces that defy the natural order. These are narratives where the distinction between good and evil isn't just blurred, it's often irrelevant.

This exploration of the narrative's cutting edge draws from a long and rich tradition. The modern literary magazine owes a debt to the 'pulp' digest era, where publications first married mystery fiction with the gritty reality of true crime. This issue proudly continues that legacy, acknowledging that the most compelling fiction often hides in the shadows of the real world.

This commitment to truth is what led us to include a new, in-depth feature examining the anatomy of a recent, complex criminal case. We go beyond the headlines to dissect the investigation and the psychology of the perpetrator, holding a mirror up to the darkness that lurks within our own society. It is a stark reminder that while our fiction may explore the supernatural, the 'real crime' section grounds us in the profound, and often terrifying, realities of human nature. Ovi Dark 3 is [redacted]journey to the edge of reason, we invite you to take the first step.

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we cover every issue!

In the back alleys and dimly lit dives where morality goes to die, these stories stake their claim. Here, the world is rendered in stark contrast, the blinding flash of a muzzle, the deep shadow of a fedora's brim, the crimson stain spreading across a charcoal suit. This is the realm of the fatalistic and the fallen, where the dame is always trouble, the scheme is never clean and the hero is merely the last man standing. Driven by desperation and the promise of one big score, these tales unspool with the relentless rhythm of rain on a windowpane.

Welcome.

The verdict is already in: nobody walks away clean.

The Ovi Dark eMagazine

Pulp Fiction Short Stories
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The forged alibi
By Thanos Kalamidas

The rain in London didn't just fall; it interrogated you. It beat against the grime-streaked window of my second-storey office on Wardour Street, a steady, rhythmic drumming that matched the throbbing behind my temples. The neon sign across the street flickered 'Palace Billiards' in a bleeding pink hue, casting long, sickly shadows across my desk. I was down to my last double finger of cheap gin and a pack of Player's cigarettes that had gone soft from the damp. My name is Frank Curtis. The frosted glass on my door read Curtis Investigations: Discreet Enquiries. Mostly, it meant watching cheating spouses through a telephoto lens or tracking down vanished bookies. It was a living, barely.

The door opened without a knock. That's always the first sign of a client who thinks his money buys the right to skip manners.

He was tall, built like a brick outhouse, wrapped in a heavy camel-hair coat that smelled of expensive cologne and West End theatres. His jawline was sharp enough to slice bread, and his eyes had the cold, calculating stillness of a poker player holding a royal flush.

This was luxury, but his name, as he announced it while dropping a thick leather briefcase onto my desk, was Julian Croft.

"You Curtis?" Croft asked, his voice a smooth, low baritone that belonged on BBC radio, not in a dingy room that smelled of stale tobacco and wet wool.

"The name's on the glass," I said, not moving an inch. I didn't offer him a seat. If he wanted one, he'd take it. "And unless you're here to deliver a prize-winning ham, you're letting the draft in."

Croft smiled, a thin, humourless curl of the lips. He clicked the brass latches of the briefcase. It sprang open to reveal neat stacks of Bank of England fivers. A cool thousand, at a glance. In 1956, that was enough to buy a house, or a man's conscience.

"I require your professional services, Mr Curtis. Not your detective skills. Your testimony."

I took a slow drag of my cigarette, letting the smoke filter through my nose. "I don't sell perjury, Mr Croft. It's bad for the lungs."

"You aren't selling perjury. You are establishing a timeline," he corrected smoothly, sliding five bundles across the green felt of my desk. "Tonight. From exactly ten o'clock until midnight. You and I were right here, in this office, reviewing a sensitive corporate espionage file. You will document it in your ledger. You will sign it. If the police ask, you will swear to it with that rugged, unshakeable integrity you PI types wear like a badge."

"And where will you actually be between ten and midnight?"

"That is the precise beauty of a thousand pounds, Mr Curtis. It completely absolves you of the burden of curiosity." He leaned forward, his eyes locking onto mine. "Do we have an understanding? I am leaving for Paris on the early boat-train tomorrow. I simply need an airtight, legally verifiable presence in Soho tonight to satisfy some rather te-

dious creditors who watch my movements."

It didn't smell right. It smelled like high-grade felony. But my landlord was threatening to throw my filing cabinets into the alley, and my stomach had been grumbling for twelve hours. Besides, providing a fake alibi for a rich playboy dodging debt collectors felt like a victimless crime. I pulled my leather-bound ledger toward me, dipped my fountain pen in the inkwell, and wrote: 22:00 – Meeting with J. Croft re: internal leakage.

"We have an understanding," I said.

Croft nodded, satisfied. He left the cash, took his briefcase, and vanished back into the rainy night like a phantom of the high bourgeoisie. I checked my watch. It was exactly 9.45 pm.

By midnight, the bottle of gin was empty, the thousand pounds was locked in my floor safe, and I was feeling remarkably comfortable with my sudden lapse in morality. I locked up the office and walked down to the street, intending to catch a cab back to my flat in Belsize Park. But the universe has a funny way of balancing the books.

A black Austin Westminster pulled up short against the kerb, its tyres screeching on the wet macadam. Out stepped Detective Inspector Mallory of Scotland Yard. Mallory and I had a history; we'd broken into the business together before I took a dislike to the police commissioner's tie and resigned. He looked like an old bloodhound who had spent the day chewing on bad news.

"Curtis," Mallory grunted, flipping up his collar against the downpour. "Get in."

"I'm off the clock, Mallory. Go harass a streetwalker."

"It's Leo," Mallory said simply.

The name hit me like a physical blow to the solar plexus. Leo. My estranged younger brother. The family genius, the gambler, the beautiful boy who could never keep his hands out of other peo-

ple's pockets. We hadn't spoken in five years, not since he cleared out my savings account to back a horse that finished its race sometime the following Thursday.

"What about him?" I asked, my voice suddenly tight.

"He's dead, Frank. Found him an hour ago down at the old wharf warehouse in Wapping. Two bullets in the chest. Professional job. Close range." Mallory opened the passenger door. "Come on. You need to identify the body."

The world went cold. The thousand pounds in my safe suddenly felt like a block of ice burning through the floorboards. I climbed into the car.

The Wapping warehouse was a cavernous, dripping tomb that smelled of rotting timber and river mud. A single bare bulb hung from a frayed cord, swaying slightly in the river breeze, casting monstrous dancing shadows. Underneath it, stretched out on a canvas gurney, was Leo.

He looked smaller than I remembered. His sharp, handsome face was pale, almost translucent under the harsh light. The front of his silk shirt was stained a dark, terrible crimson. I stood over him, my hands shoved deep into my trench coat pockets so Mallory wouldn't see them shaking. Five years of anger vanished, replaced by a hollow, aching void.

"It's him," I said, my voice steady only by sheer force of will.

"We found something else," Mallory said, gesturing to a chalk circle on the muddy floorboards nearby. "A struggle. Your brother was blackmailing someone high up, Frank. He had a ledger of his own. We found a notebook in his pocket. It mentions a meeting tonight at ten o'clock sharp at this warehouse. The killer was thorough, took the ledger, but Leo had written down the initials of the man he was meeting."

Mallory pulled a small, blood-spotted notepad from an evidence bag. Written in Leo's chaotic scrawl was: 10.00 PM – J.C. – Wapping Wharf.

My heart stopped. J.C. Julian Croft.

"The medical examiner puts the time of death between ten and eleven tonight," Mallory continued, looking at me with professional scrutiny. "You wouldn't happen to know anyone with those initials who had a grudge against your brother, would you, Frank?"

I looked at the chalk circle, then back at Leo's cold face. The puzzle pieces didn't just fall into place; they crashed down like a falling safe. Croft hadn't been dodging creditors. He had hired me to provide an airtight alibi for the exact two hours he was executing my brother across London. He'd chosen me because I was a reputable, licensed investigator whose word would hold weight with the Yard. And the ultimate, sick joke of it all? He'd used me, the victim's own brother, to guarantee his freedom.

If I told Mallory the truth right now, Croft's lawyers would tear me to shreds. I'd already written his name in my ledger at ten o'clock. If I admitted I lied for money, my credibility was shot, the alibi would be contested, but a clever defence barrister would argue I was framing Croft to avenge my brother. I needed more than a retracted statement. I needed the smoking gun. I needed the ledger Croft had stolen from Leo.

"No," I lied, looking Mallory dead in the eye. "Doesn't ring a bell. Leo knew half the crooks from Mayfair to Whitechapel."

"Right," Mallory said, sighing. "If you think of anything, Frank..."

"I'll let you know," I said. "Right after I get a drink."

Croft had mentioned he was taking the early boat-train to Paris tomorrow. That meant he was staying somewhere high-end tonight, packing his bags and gloating over his perfect crime. A man like that wouldn't stay in a flophouse. I used a public call box to ring the night porter at the Savoy, the Dorchester, and finally the Ritz. A crisp five-pound note

promised over the phone to the night clerk at the Ritz confirmed that a Mr Julian Croft was registered in Suite 404 and had requested a 5.00 am wake-up call.

It was 1.30 am when I slipped through the service entrance of the Ritz. I didn't take the lift; I took the stairs, my rubber-soled brogues making no sound against the marble. In my right coat pocket, the heavy, comforting weight of my .38 snub-nosed Colt gave me a grim sense of purpose.

I reached Suite 404. I didn't bother picking the lock. I knew Croft. He was arrogant. Arrogant men believe their own alibis are impenetrable shields.

I gave a sharp, authoritative knock. "Room service. Your early newspaper, sir."

A pause. Then, the sound of footsteps. The door opened an inch, secured by a brass chain. Croft's handsome face appeared, his silk robe immaculate, a glass of scotch in his hand. When he saw my face, and more importantly, the blue steel barrel of the .38 wedged into the doorframe, his aristocratic composure didn't crack. It just hardened.

"Mr Curtis," he said smoothly. "A bit late for a professional consult, isn't it? If you're here to ask for more money, I find greed unseemly."

"Unchain the door, Croft. Or I'll put three rounds through this mahogany and let the night porter clean up the mess."

He assessed the look in my eyes, the look of a man who had nothing left to lose and slowly slid the chain back. I stepped into the room, kicking the door shut behind me. The suite was luxurious, dominated by a massive leather suitcase half-packed on the bed. Sitting right on top of a pile of silk shirts was a small, black oilskin notebook. Leo's ledger.

"You've been busy tonight," I said, gesturing with the gun toward the notebook.

Croft walked back to the small

bar cart, completely unbothered by the weapon trained on his chest. "I see you've discovered my little misdirection. I must admit, finding out that the enterprising young blackmailer who was draining my bank account shared a surname with Soho's most pliable private detective was a delightful coincidence. It made the alibi poetic, don't you think?"

"He was my brother, you son of a bitch," I growled, taking a step forward.

Croft stopped, his hand hovering over the decanter. For a fraction of a second, surprise registered in his cold eyes. Then, he laughed. A soft, aristocratic chuckle that made my blood boil.

"Your brother? Oh, that is marvellous! The Perry Mason strategy completely backfires. I hire the brother to clear the killer. If you come forward now, Curtis, you ruin yourself. You admit to forgery, perjury, and complicity. Who will the jury believe? A decorated corporate executive with a signed, timed entry in a licensed investigator's ledger, or a disgraced ex-cop trying to pin a murder on a client because of a sudden attack of fraternal sentimentality?"

"They'll believe the evidence," I said, reaching for Leo's black notebook with my left hand.

"I don't think so," Croft said.

With lightning speed born of desperate privilege, he smashed the heavy crystal decanter across my forearm. The gun went off with a deafening roar, the bullet shattering a priceless Louis XIV mirror. The impact sent the Colt spinning across the plush carpet.

Croft lunged at me, his fists driving into my ribs with surprising force. He wasn't just a playboy; he'd learned to fight in some high-society boxing club. I reeled back, gasping for air, but years of Soho street brawls had given me a higher tolerance for pain than him. As he came in for a finishing right cross, I ducked under his arm, drove my elbow squarely into his kidney, and brought my forehead down sharply against his nose.

There was a satisfying crunch. Croft bellowed in agony, clutching his blood-spurted face. He stumbled backward, tripping over his own suitcase, and crashed heavily against the heavy writing desk, sliding to the floor, dazed and broken.

I retrieved my Colt from under the armchair, my breath coming in ragged gasps. I wiped a smear of blood from my own cheek, then picked up Leo's black notebook from the bed, stuffing it into my pocket.

Croft looked up at me, his nose crooked, blood dripping onto his silk robe. He spat a mouthful of red onto the carpet. "Go ahead then," he sneered, his voice thick. "Shoot me. You still can't go to the police without destroying yourself."

I stood over him, lowering the gun, a grim smile finally touching my lips. "You know, Croft, you're right about one thing. I can't go to Mallory and admit I forged that alibi. It would ruin my professional standing."

I reached into my pocket, pulled out the heavy brass key to my office safe, and tossed it onto his bleeding chest. Along with it, I dropped a piece of note paper from the Ritz desk where I'd quickly scribbled a note.

"What is this?" he hissed.

"That's the key to my safe, where your thousand pounds is currently sitting," I said cheerfully. "And that note is a signed confession from me, stating that you broke into my office tonight while I was out at the Wapping docks, stole my ledger, and forced me at gunpoint here at the Ritz to hand over the key to the safe to recover your money. You see, when Mallory checks my office ledger, he'll find your name written there. But when he finds your fingerprints all over my office safe, and Leo's blackmail ledger right here in your suitcase alongside my safe key, he's not going to think I gave you an alibi. He's going to think you tried to frame me for your cover-up."

Croft's face drained of what

little colour it had left. “You’re insane. The timeline...”

“The timeline works perfectly,” I interrupted, stepping back toward the door. “I’ve already called Mallory from the lobby before I came up. Told him I found the man who killed Leo, and that he was currently packing his bags at the Ritz. He should be downstairs with the sirens on right about... now.”

As if on cue, the distant, rising wail of police bells cut through the London rain, echoing up from Piccadilly.

Croft scrambled to his feet, lunging for the suitcase to hide the ledger, but his broken spirit and shattered nose made him clumsy. I stepped out into the corridor, closing the door firmly behind me.

I walked down the grand corridor of the Ritz, lighting my last cigarette. The case was closed, the alibi was broken, and Leo could finally get some rest. It wasn’t exactly courtroom protocol, but as Perry Mason might have said, justice isn’t always found in the law books; sometimes it’s just a matter of making the bad guy play the hand he dealt himself. ■

The neon ledger
By Archie Michael

The rain in Bay City didn't wash anything clean; it just made the scum slick. It was two in the morning, and the air inside the basement of the 4th Precinct smelled of damp concrete, stale Chesterfield tobacco, and the distinct, vinegar tang of cheap floor wax.

Officer Larry Vance was twenty-four, possessed a chin that looked like it had been carved out of a block of pine, and wore a uniform so crisp the creases could cut glass. He was three weeks out of the academy, which meant he still believed the badge on his chest stood for something more than a shield against a vagrancy charge. He was sitting at a steel desk outside the evidence locker, a heavy ring of brass keys resting beside a lukewarm cup of chicory coffee, trying to read a paperback thriller that couldn't compete with the real-life misery drifting down from the holding cells upstairs.

The basement door groaned on its hinges.

Vance didn't look up immediately. He finished his sentence, marked his page with a matchbook, and then raised his eyes. His spine stiffened.

Captain Marcus Brody was not a man who usually frequented the catacombs of the precinct at two o'clock on a Tuesday morning. Brody was six feet two inches of tailored charcoal wool, pomade, and political ambition. He had the face of an old boxer who had successfully transitioned into real estate, fleshy, broken-nosed, but smoothed over with expensive dinners and barbershop shaves.

"Vance," Brody said. His voice was a low, gravelly rumble, like coal sliding down a chute.

"Captain," Vance said, standing up and instinctively straightening his belt. "Didn't expect you tonight."

"The world doesn't stop turning just because the sun goes down, kid." Brody walked past the desk without looking at him, his heavy wingtips clicking against the concrete. He stopped in front of the heavy iron mesh door of the evidence locker. "Open it up."

Vance blinked. "Sir? The logbook requires a case file number for after-hours entry. Standard

procedure."

Brody turned slowly. He didn't look angry; he looked amused, the way a cat looks at a mouse that thinks the baseboard is a fortress. "Standard procedure is what we tell the newspapers, Vance. I'm conducting an administrative audit. Open the gate."

Vance felt a cold drop of sweat trace a slow line down his ribs. He looked at the keys, then at Brody's hand, which was resting casually inside his overcoat pocket. The silhouette under the wool wasn't a pipe.

"Right, sir," Vance said. He picked up the ring. The brass keys clanked together with a sound that felt terribly loud in the enclosed space. He unlocked the padlock, pulled back the heavy iron latch, and swung the mesh door wide.

Brody stepped inside. The evidence locker was a maze of industrial shelving loaded with the debris of human failure: tagged switchblades, brown paper bags containing bloody shirts, rows of cheap whiskey bottles, and stacked wooden crates. Brody walked past the small-fry contraband and stopped at the cage in the back, the high-security vault where the narcotics and large-currency seizures were kept.

"Key," Brody commanded, holding out a thick, manicured hand without turning around.

Vance stepped into the locker, his boots echoing. He handed over the smaller key. Brody twisted it in the lock, yanked the door open, and reached inside. He dragged out three heavy, green canvas duffel bags. They landed on the concrete floor with a heavy, muffled thud that didn't sound like clothes or hardware. It sounded like paper. Millions of pages of it, tightly packed.

Brody unzipped the top bag. Inside, stacked in neat, brick-like tiers, were bundles of hundred-dollar bills. The green ink looked almost luminous under the bare fluorescent bulb overhead. It was the take from the Fontana warehouse raid three

nights ago, the Lucchesi family's payroll.

"That's a lot of paper for an audit, Captain," Vance said, his voice remarkably steady for a man whose career and life expectancy, was currently balance-beaming on a razor blade.

Brody didn't look up as he began lifting the bricks of cash out, checking the serial bands, and tossing them into a large, leather traveling trunk that Vance hadn't noticed sitting in the corner of the vault. "The Lucchesi money is being transferred to a federal depository for safekeeping, Vance. Chain of custody."

"And the federal depository uses a vintage Gladstone trunk instead of an armored car?" Vance asked. He leaned against a shelf of confiscated shotguns, crossing his arms. "They must have changed the manual while I was in the academy."

Brody stopped. He let a stack of bills drop into the trunk with a soft clap. He turned his head sideways, looking at Vance through a screen of gray smoke from a cigarette he had just lit. "You're a bright boy, Larry. Clean. No bad habits. A mother in Ohio you send twenty bucks a week to. It'd be a terrible thing if the department had to report that you were found down here with your pockets full of horse and a self-inflicted wound in your temple."

"It would certainly ruin my chances for the department baseball team," Vance agreed. He looked at the trunk, then back at Brody. "But then again, a suicide with a bullet angle entering from the top down is hard to sell to a coroner, even one on your payroll, Captain. Hamilton Burger up at the D.A.'s office has been looking for a reason to audit this precinct for six months. He'd dissect your 'administrative audit' with a scalpel."

Brody let out a short, barking laugh that had no mirth in it. "Burger couldn't find a crooked cop in a mirror. You think you're the first kid with a shiny badge who thought he could play hero?

Let me tell you how this story ends, Vance. I take this trunk. I walk out that door. You stay here, you keep your mouth shut, and next month, you find yourself promoted to detective third-grade with a nice, quiet precinct in the hills. You don't, and you become a cautionary tale told to the next batch of recruits over beers."

"It's a compelling narrative," Vance said, stepping away from the shelf. His hand drifted toward his holster—the standard-issue Colt Official Police .38. "But I've always preferred non-fiction."

"Don't be a fool," Brody snapped, his hand tightening inside his overcoat pocket. "You pull that popgun and you're dead before it clears the leather."

"Probably," Vance said, his eyes locking onto

Brody's. "But here's the thing about rookies, Captain. We're stupid. We still read the oath we took out loud. And we don't like being the punchline to a bad joke."

The air in the room stretched thin, like an over-tuned violin string. Brody's face darkened, the smooth, polished politician mask slipping away to reveal the thuggish enforcer he had been twenty years ago. He began to draw his hand from his pocket.

The heavy steel door at the top of the basement stairs clicked.

Both men froze.

Footsteps echoed down the concrete

steps, not the heavy, hurried clatter of a beat cop, but the measured, deliberate cadence of a man who owned whatever room he walked into. A shadow fell across the threshold of the evidence room, followed by a tall, broad-shouldered man in a flawless midnight-blue suit and a gray fedora. He carried a silver-topped cane in one hand and a lit cigar in the other.

Behind him came a younger, sharper-looking man in a trench coat, his eyes darting around the room like a hawk looking for a field mouse, and a striking blonde woman with a notepad tucked under her arm.

"Am I interrupting an executive session, Captain Brody?" Perry Mason asked. He took a drag from his cigar, blowing a neat ring of smoke that drifted into the locker.

Brody's hand stopped inside his pocket. His complexion went from florid to a sickly, chalky gray. "Mason. What the hell are you doing here? This is a restricted police facility."

"It was," Mason said smoothly, stepping into the cage with the easy grace of a trial lawyer entering a courtroom. "Until my client, Mr. Tony Lucchesi, informed me that three hundred thousand dollars of his legitimately acquired commercial funds—which your men seized without a proper warrant from his warehouse, were currently being prepared for an unauthorized relocation."

"This is police business, Mason! Get out before I have you thrown in a cell for obstruction!" Brody roared, trying to bluff through the sweat now beads-ofing his forehead.

"You could try," Mason said, his voice dropping into that rich, resonant baritone that had shattered fifty state prosecutors. "But Paul Drake here..." he nodded toward the man in the trench coat "—has three independent photographers from the Bay City Chronicle sitting in a sedan outside. And Della..." he glanced at the blonde woman, "has already delivered a signed affidavit to the State Attorney General's representative at the hotel downtown,

detailing the serial numbers of the bills my client documented before your raid."

Mason walked over to the Gladstone trunk, leaned on his cane, and peered inside. "My, what an efficient filing system you have, Captain. I didn't know the 4th Precinct had switched to leather luggage for internal banking."

Brody looked at Vance, his eyes wild, calculating the distance to the door, the odds of a shootout, the cost of a lifetime in San Quentin. Vance's .38 was out now, the hammer back, pointing directly at the center of Brody's expensive wool coat.

"Don't look at him, Captain," Vance said, a cool smile touching his lips. "He's just the defense attorney. I'm the guy who's going to execute the arrest if you move your finger another inch."

Brody's shoulders sagged. The fight drained out of him all at once, leaving him looking old, deflated, and thick around the middle. His hand came out of his pocket, empty, and he reached for his belt, unbuckling his service revolver and letting it clatter to the floor.

"You're done, Marcus," Paul Drake said, stepping forward with a pair of handcuffs he'd borrowed from the front desk sergeant upstairs, who was currently staring into a cup of coffee pretending the world wasn't ending downstairs.

As Drake clicked the steel cuffs around Brody's wrists, Perry Mason turned his gaze to Vance. He looked the young officer up and down, taking in the straight spine, the unblinking eyes, and the steady hand on the revolver.

"Officer Vance, isn't it?" Mason asked.

"Yes, sir," Vance said, lowering the hammer of his weapon and slipping it back into the holster.

"The D.A. is going to need a star witness who can't be bought, intimidated, or confused on the stand," Mason said, adjusting his brim. "It's a rare commodity

in this town. If you can handle a cross-examination from a man like me, you might just survive this department."

"I can handle the heat, Mr. Mason," Vance said, picking up his chicory coffee, which was completely cold now. He took a sip anyway, his eyes meeting the lawyer's. "As long as the court reporter gets the spelling of my name right."

Mason let out a rare, genuine smile, nodding once. "We'll make sure of it, young man. Come along, Della. Let's leave the 4th Precinct to its new management."

The basement was quiet again by three in the morning. The rain outside had finally stopped, leaving the streets of Bay City glittering under the streetlamps like a cheap rhinestone necklace. Vance sat back down at his steel desk, opened his paperback thriller, and finally found his place. The air still smelled of damp concrete and old tobacco, but for the first time in three weeks, the basement felt remarkably clean. ■

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Jonestown 1978

On 18 November 1978, one of the darkest tragedies of the twentieth century unfolded deep within the jungles of Guyana. More than 900 people died in what became known as the Jonestown Massacre, although historians often describe it more accurately as the Jonestown mass murder-suicide. The event was orchestrated by cult leader Jim Jones, whose followers had travelled thousands of miles believing they were building a peaceful, equal society free from racism, poverty and injustice.

Instead, they found themselves trapped in an isolated settlement where fear, manipulation and violence replaced hope. The deaths at Jonestown shocked the world, not only because of their scale but because they challenged a comforting assumption that ordinary people could never willingly surrender their freedom to a dangerous leader. History has repeatedly shown otherwise.

In my opinion, Jonestown remains one of the clearest warnings about the destructive power of charismatic authority, psychological manipulation and unquestioning obedience. It is a tragedy that deserves to be remembered not for sensationalism but for the lessons it continues to offer.

Jim Jones began his public career as a preacher during the 1950s in the United States. At first glance, he appeared progressive and compassionate. His organisation, the Peoples Temple, promoted racial integration at a time when segregation still divided much of America. Jones welcomed black and white worshippers together, organised charitable work and preached social equality.

Many followers joined because they genuinely wanted to improve society. They believed Jones represented justice, kindness and fairness. His message appealed particularly to those who had experienced discrimination, poverty or loneliness.

However, behind this public image lay a far darker reality. Jones demanded absolute loyalty. He increasingly claimed to possess supernatural abilities and insisted that criticism of him was betrayal. Followers were encouraged to cut ties with family members who questioned his authority, making them increasingly dependent upon him.

Over time, the Peoples Temple stopped functioning as a religious movement and became centred almost entirely on one man.

Growing criticism from journalists and former members convinced Jones that his organisation was under attack. In response, he sought isolation. He established an agricultural settlement in Guyana, a small English-speaking nation in South America. The project was promoted as a socialist paradise where equality, cooperation and hard work would create a better future.

Hundreds of members relocated there, believing they were helping to build a utopian community. Reality proved very different. Life at Jonestown was harsh. The tropical climate was exhausting, food was limited, and members worked long hours. Armed guards monitored daily life, and permission was needed to leave. Letters home were often controlled or censored.

Perhaps most disturbing was the constant psychological pressure. Jones regularly delivered

lengthy speeches over loudspeakers that echoed throughout the settlement day and night. He portrayed the outside world as dangerous and claimed enemies were plotting to destroy them. Fear became the community's most powerful form of control.

Many people struggle to understand why residents simply did not leave. The answer lies in recognising how cults operate. Members had gradually surrendered their independence over many years. They had often donated their savings, abandoned careers and severed family relationships. Their entire social network existed inside the Temple.

Jones reinforced obedience through humiliation, surveillance and intimidation. Public punishments became common, while criticism was portrayed as evidence of weakness or betrayal. He also conducted so-called "White Night" rehearsals. During these drills, followers were told that enemies were approaching and that everyone might soon have to die together rather than surrender. Sometimes drinks were distributed and members were informed they contained poison. Only afterwards were they told the exercise had been a loyalty test.

Repeated rehearsals normalised the unimaginable. By the time the final day arrived, many had already experienced versions of the event several times.

Concerned relatives in the United States grew increasingly worried about loved ones living in Jonestown. Reports emerged describing abuse, imprisonment and psychological control. These

concerns eventually led to a visit by U.S. Congressman Leo Ryan.

Initially, Jones attempted to present Jonestown as peaceful and successful. Visitors were shown smiling residents, communal meals and cultural performances. Yet beneath the surface, tension simmered. Several members secretly passed notes asking to leave with Ryan's delegation.

Jones viewed these defections as an unforgivable betrayal. As Ryan's group prepared to depart from a nearby airstrip, Temple gunmen opened fire. Congressman Ryan, journalists and defectors were killed. The murders destroyed any possibility of a peaceful resolution.

Back at Jonestown, Jones gathered the community. He claimed American forces would soon invade, torture the adults and harm their children. According to recordings made during the final meeting, he insisted death was preferable to capture.

Parents were instructed to administer poison to their own

children before consuming it themselves. Many victims almost certainly believed there was no escape. Others resisted.

Eyewitness accounts and later investigations suggest that some individuals attempted to flee while others refused outright. Armed guards surrounded the settlement, making escape extremely difficult. Evidence indicates that numerous people were forced or coerced into dying against their will.

This distinction matters great-

ly. Calling Jonestown simply a "mass suicide" risks ignoring the reality that many victims did not freely choose death. Children certainly had no choice whatsoever.

Jonestown did not occur because hundreds of people suddenly lost their ability to think rationally. Instead, it resulted from years of gradual manipulation. Jones isolated followers from alternative viewpoints. He convinced them outsiders were enemies. He created dependence. He rewarded obedience. He punished dissent.

He exploited fear more effectively than violence alone ever could. Psychologists often describe this as coercive control, a process that slowly reshapes how individuals perceive reality. Seen this way, Jonestown becomes less mysterious and more frightening. It demonstrates that under the right conditions, manipulation can profoundly alter human judgement.

News of more than 900 deaths spread rapidly across the world. Photographs showing hundreds of bodies lying across the settlement became among the most haunting images of the twentieth century. The event dominated newspaper headlines for weeks.

Public fascination was immense, but so too was misunderstanding. Many people dismissed victims as foolish or gullible. Such attitudes overlooked the complexity of coercive influence.

The residents of Jonestown were not a collection of irrational fanatics from the beginning. Many were educated, compassionate people seeking purpose, equality and community. Their vulnerability arose not from stupidity but from trust placed in the wrong individual.

The tragedy transformed how governments, psychologists and researchers viewed destructive cults. It prompted renewed interest in coercive persuasion, charismatic leadership and psychological dependency. Law enforcement agencies became more aware of groups that isolate members from society while

demanding unquestioning loyalty.

Families also became more alert to warning signs including extreme secrecy, financial exploitation and social isolation. Even decades later, Jonestown remains a reference point whenever society discusses dangerous cults or manipulative leaders. Although no two groups are identical, similar patterns repeatedly emerge.

Absolute authority. Isolation. Fear. Suppression of criticism. Claims that only the leader possesses the truth. History demonstrates that these warning signs should never be ignored.

Jonestown should never be remembered simply because of the shocking number of deaths. It should be remembered because it reveals uncomfortable truths about human nature. Many people like to believe they would never be manipulated by a charismatic leader. Yet history consistently challenges that confidence. Under prolonged psychological pressure, combined with isola-

tion and fear, even intelligent and compassionate individuals can become trapped in systems that seem impossible to escape.

The greatest lesson from Jonestown is not that people are weak. It is that manipulation can be extraordinarily powerful when left unchecked. Remembering the victims means resisting the temptation to mock or oversimplify what happened. Instead, we should study how trust was exploited, how warning signs were ignored and how one man's absolute authority destroyed hundreds of lives.

History cannot change what occurred in Guyana in November 1978. It can, however, help prevent similar tragedies from happening again. Jonestown

stands as one of history's starkest reminders that freedom of thought, open discussion and the courage to question authority are not merely democratic ideals, they are essential safeguards against catastrophe. ■

The cold trap
by Aimee Ingram

The rain in Bay City didn't wash anything clean; it just made the grime slick. Down on Twelfth Street, the neon sign for O'Leary's Tavern bled a greasy crimson into the puddles, buzzing like a dying hornet. Inside, the air was sixty percent tobacco smoke, forty percent cheap rye, and zero percent hope.

Leo Vance watched it all from a corner booth. He watched the way the amber liquor caught the light in the glass. He watched the bartender swipe a dirty rag across the mahogany. He watched it all, but he couldn't feel it. Not the dampness in the air, not the burning kick of the whiskey, not even the floorboards beneath his feet. He was dead, and being dead was the most tedious thing that had ever happened to him.

Three days ago, Leo had been the sharpest private investigator from here to the state line. He had an office with gold lettering on the door, a filing cabinet that actually held files instead of empty bottles, and a future. Then came a dark alley behind the docks, a silver-plated .38, and a slug through his left lung. The man holding the gun had been wearing an expensive camel-hair coat, but Leo hadn't seen the face.

Now, Leo was a shadow with an eviction notice from the mortal coil, stuck watching the only man who could hear him: Detective Silas Thorne.

Thorne was currently trying to find the bottom of his fifth glass of rotgut. His trench coat looked like it had been used to mop a garage floor, his collar was stained with three days of sweat, and his jaw carried a grey stubble that could grid down iron. Five years ago, Thorne had been a rising star on the force until he took a bribe to bury a homicide case—a case Leo had been building. Thorne's corruption had blown Leo's star witness right out of the water, ruined Leo's agency, and sent Thorne into a downward spiral of professional disgrace and functional alcoholism.

"You look like hell, Silas," Leo said, leaning over the table.

Thorne didn't move. He just stared into his glass, his eyes bloodshot and watery. He couldn't hear Leo's voice in his ears, but he could hear it in the back of his skull, like a maggot chewing through wood.

Leave me alone, Vance, Thorne thought, his lips barely twitching. You're dead. Act like it.

"I'd love to," Leo said, his voice a dry, sardonic purr. "But you're my ticket to the checkout counter. The big guy upstairs, or downstairs, gave me a strict itinerary: find the guy who put the hole in my chest, or spend eternity watching you marinate your liver. And frankly, your company is worse than hell."

Thorne grunted, reaching for the bottle. Before his trembling fingers could wrap around the neck, Leo stepped forward. It wasn't a physical push; it was a sudden, violent alignment of gears. Leo slid into Thorne's skin like an old hand into a greasy work glove.

The sensation hit Leo like a physical blow. Suddenly, the world rushed back—and it tasted terrible. A wave of stale whiskey, tobacco ash, and intense nau-

sea washed over him. His knees throbbed with arthritis, and his liver felt like a hot brick.

"God, Silas, what do you eat? Coal?" Leo muttered aloud, using Thorne's gravelly, alcohol-ruined vocal cords. He shook his head, trying to clear the fog of Thorne's drunkenness with his own sharp, disciplined willpower. He forced Thorne's hand away from the bottle and stood up. The room tilted dangerously, but Leo braced his feet, commanding the sodden muscles to straighten.

"Hey, Thorne! You paying for that or just admiring the glass?" O'Leary shouted from behind the bar.

Leo turned Thorne's face toward the bartender, fixing him with a cold, razor-sharp stare that Thorne hadn't possessed in a decade. "Put it on my tab, O'Leary. And if I come back, remind me to drink lighter fluid. It's got a better finish."

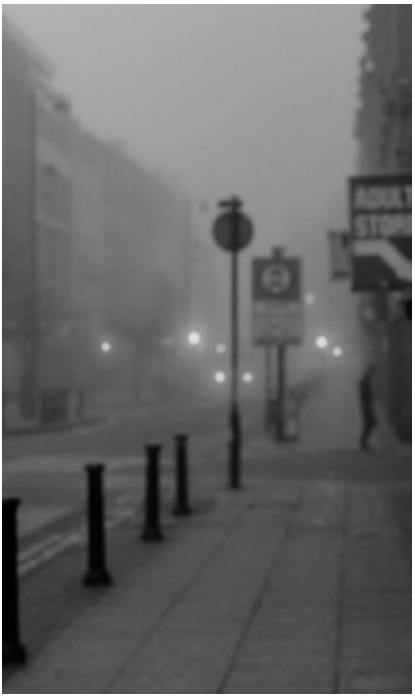
He walked out into the rain, Thorne's mind screaming in protest the entire time. Where are we going, you maniac? I'm off duty! I've been off duty for three years!

"We have an appointment with a lady," Leo said through his teeth, pulling Thorne's damp hat low over his eyes. "And unlike you, I don't keep women waiting."

The destination was the penthouse apartment of Evelyn Montgomery, the wealthy widow of the shipping magnate whose death Leo had been investigating before he was permanently sidelined. The lobby of the Montgomery Arms was all white marble and gold leaf, a stark contrast to the dripping wreck Leo was piloting through the door.

The uniformed doorman stepped out, his face curling in disgust. "Now see here, Thorne. Mrs. Montgomery isn't seeing any city bums tonight. Get out before I call the real cops."

Leo didn't waste time. He used Thorne's heavy frame to shove past the man, pinning him against the marble pillar with an elbow to the throat. "Listen to



me, Clarence," Leo growled, his voice carrying the precise, intimidating weight of a man who knew which judges were on whose payroll. "You tell Mrs. Montgomery that Silas Thorne is here with a message from Leo Vance. Tell her the dead man found the ledger."

The doorman's eyes went wide. He gasped for air, nodding furiously. Leo let him go, patted him on the cheek, and walked straight into the brass-gated elevator.

Inside Thorne's head, the detective was panicking. What ledger? Vance, what are you doing? She's old money! She's got the police chief on speed dial!

"She's also got a killer on her payroll," Leo said, adjusting Thorne's crooked tie in the mirrored elevator wall. "When I was alive, I thought her husband's death was an insurance scam. But the night I died, I found out the truth. Old man Montgomery wasn't killed for the insurance. He was killed because he discovered his lovely wife was smuggling contraband through the eastern docks. The same docks where I was shot."

The elevator chimed. The doors slid open to reveal a sprawling apartment carpeted in thick, cream-colored wool. Sitting in a velvet armchair by a roaring fireplace was Evelyn Montgomery. She was in her late thirties, with platinum hair styled in perfect waves, wearing a black silk gown that looked like elegant mourning wear but tasted like victory. Next to her stood a tall man in a camel-hair coat. His face was

sharp, scarred, and completely unfamiliar to Thorne—but Leo recognized the coat instantly.

"Mr. Thorne," Evelyn said, her voice like ice chips dropping into a silver bucket. "The doorman said you had a message from a ghost. I find that highly unlikely, considering Mr. Vance was buried yesterday."

Leo walked Thorne into the room, his boots leaving wet, muddy tracks on the immaculate carpet. He didn't look at Evelyn; he looked at the man in the camel-hair coat.

"Nice coat," Leo said, Thorne's voice cracking slightly as the alcohol tried to reassert its grip. Leo clamped down on the temptation to look for a drink. "Must have cost a pretty penny. Tell me, does the silver-plated .38 come with it, or did you buy that separately?"

The man's hand shifted slightly toward his jacket pocket.

"Don't do it, pal," Leo warned, taking a slow, heavy step forward. "My friend Silas here might be a drunk, but his reflexes are still wired to a badge. Or at least, mine are."

Vance, that's Max 'The Hammer' Garrow! Thorne's internal voice shrieked. He's a contract enforcer for the syndicate! He'll gut us like a fish!

"Shut up, Silas, I'm cross-examining," Leo muttered under his breath. He turned his attention to Evelyn. "Mrs. Montgomery, you paid Garrow here five thousand dollars to put Leo Vance in the ground. You thought Vance had the ledger detailing your little shipping arrangements with the maritime unions. But Vance didn't have it on him. That's why Garrow's been tearing Vance's office apart for the last forty-eight hours."

Evelyn raised an eyebrow, amused. "This is a delightful piece of fiction, Detective Thorne. But where is your proof? In a court of law, a ruined, alcoholic ex-cop making wild accusations about a grieving widow is nothing more than a nuisance. My attorneys

would have you in a cell for slander before breakfast."

"She's right, you know," Garrow sneered, taking his hand out of his pocket. He wasn't holding a gun; he was holding a heavy, gold-plated cigarette case. "You've got nothing, Thorne. You're a ghost chasing shadows."

"I may be a ghost," Leo said, a grim smile touching Thorne's lips, "but I'm a ghost who knows how to read a filing system. You see, Evelyn, I didn't keep the ledger at my office. I knew your pet cop here, Silas, had ruined my last case by tipping off your friends. So I didn't trust the usual spots. I hid it in the one place no one would ever look the bottom drawer of Silas Thorne's desk at the precinct, labelled 'Unresolved Complaints'."

Thorne's mind went blank with shock. You hid it in my desk?!

"Exactly," Leo said aloud. "Because everyone knows Silas hasn't opened that drawer since 1922. But three hours ago, an anonymous tip went to the District Attorney's office. A tip from a 'concerned citizen' suggesting they check that very drawer. Right about now, ADA Hamilton is reading your shipping manifests, Evelyn. And he's probably wondering why your signature is next to three shipments of industrial blasting caps that went missing last month."

Evelyn's face drained of colour. The icy composure evaporated, replaced by a sharp, feral desperation. "Max," she hissed. "Kill him."

Garrow didn't hesitate. His hand flew back into his coat, pulling a sleek, silver-plated .38 revolver.

But Leo had been waiting for the movement. He didn't try to outdraw Garrow with Thorne's slow, rusted reflexes. Instead, he lunged forward, throwing all of Thorne's considerable, beer-bloated weight into a low tackle.

The two men crashed into a glass coffee table, shattering it into a thousand glittering shards.

Garrow's gun went off, the bullet splintering the mantlepiece above the fire.

Thorne's body screamed in pain as the glass cut through the trench coat. Ow! Damn it, Vance, that's my ribs!

"Hold your horses, Silas, we're winning!" Leo roared. He used Thorne's heavy fist to deliver a brutal, short-arc punch straight to Garrow's jaw. The enforcer's head snapped back, his eyes rolling up as his skull bounced off the hardwood floor. He went limp.

Leo scrambled up, Thorne's chest heaving for air, and grabbed Garrow's fallen revolver. He spun around, levelling the barrel straight at Evelyn Montgomery, who was reaching into her desk drawer for a small pearl-handled derringer.

"I wouldn't," Leo said, his voice dropping into a hard, professional register that would have made Perry Mason proud. "The gun in my hand has a hair-trigger, Mrs. Montgomery, and my host

has a terrible tremor. It's a bad combination for anyone standing in front of me."

Evelyn froze, her hand hovering over the open drawer. She looked at Thorne, really looked at him—and saw something in his eyes that didn't belong to the neighborhood drunk. She saw the cold, relentless intellect of the man she thought she had murdered.

"Who are you?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

"The name is Vance," Leo said, tipping Thorne's hat with his free hand. "I'm just handling the closing arguments."

The heavy double doors of the penthouse burst open. Three uniformed police officers and an assistant district attorney stepped into the room, their guns drawn.

"Drop the weapon, Thorne!" the lead officer shouted.

Leo slowly lowered the .38, placing it gently on the intact edge of the desk. He stepped back, letting his hands raise in cooperation.

ADA Hamilton walked forward, looking at the broken glass, the unconscious enforcer, and the pale widow. Then he looked at Thorne. "We got the ledger, Thorne. Every word of it checks out. But how the hell did you know it was there? And how did you know about Garrow?"

Leo felt a sudden, deep tug at the center of his being. The weight of Thorne's body began to slip away. The pain in the ribs faded; the taste of whiskey grew distant. His time was up. The case was solved, the killer was caught, and the ledger was in the hands of the law.

Before he let go completely, Leo leaned back into the corner of Thorne's mind, leaving one final, parting gift, a surge of pure, unadulterated sobriety and a spark of old pride.

He's all yours, Silas, Leo thought, stepping out of the skin. Try to keep the uniform clean.

Thorne blinked. Suddenly, the fog in his brain cleared completely. The craving for a drink was still there, but for the first time in five years, it was overridden by something stronger: the sharp, electric hum of a job well done. He looked down at his hands, then up at the ADA.

"I'm a detective, Hamilton," Thorne said, his voice steady, his eyes clear and sharp as flint. He adjusted his coat, ignoring the cuts, and gave Evelyn Montgomery a cold, professional smile. "Sometimes, you just have to listen to the ghosts." ■

An OLD STONE BRIDGE

A ghost story from County Kerry, Ireland

by David Sparenberg

Three men were walking down a road. It was late night. The sky was clear; there was no moon. The land was dark.

There was a hush that was thick and heavy in the darkness. The three men came to an old stone bridge and began to cross over. The bridge was blacker than the road, with shadows down on it.

In the middle of the bridge, the man in the middle of the men stiffened and stood still. Standing there, he stared amazedly into the black night before him. "Well, will you look at that!" he says and starts to quiver. A little wind blows by suddenly, a foul pestilence within it, tossing off the frightened man's hat, twisting angerly through his hair.

The other two men, they too stop walking and look out at the blackness ahead of them. Neither man sees a moving thing. Then the middleman speaks again, his voice cracking like an eggshell being broken slowly between a thumb and forefingers. He says, "What a sight is after us!" But the man had no more spoken than something powerful sweeps him up from between his

fellows and flies and throws him back behind the bridge, in a ditch at the side of the road.

Stunned the other two men are motionless, breathless, feeling around in the dense night with their startled eyes. Far off a dog begins barking. Closer by a cow starts to low. Now there's a thud like lumber falling in a bundle off the back of a wagon. Now, a pitiful, unearthly moan is traveling out across the land.

The two men go searching around until they recover the third man, thrown down in a ditch beside the road. His condition is frightfully bad, with his bones cracked everywhere and his legs twisted around so he cannot stand on his own two feet. His is the wreckage of a body pounded by a heavy weight come down hard from a murderous height. The hurt man's eyes are bulging white, and a fresh tide of blood has washed up like thick grease on his battered lips.

"Mercy!' cries one of the others. "What has happened to you here?" And the hurt man, when he regains his sense meagerly answers as he can, "Did you see him? There was fire coming out of his mouth."

The travelers carried their injured companion down to a neighboring farmhouse. They laid him in a soft, clean bed for comfort. But he only gazed

fixedly at the ceiling. Never again did the wretch give utterance to a single word.

Sky clouded; weather changed. From midnight until the crack of dawn came pounding rain and howling wind off the wild sea, storming all around the Ring of Kerry. In the early rays of dawn, those gathered beside the death-bed looked on the wreckage in horror. Even on the dead man's face, pitifully contorted. Even on the lifeless eyes, profound with terror after life had departed

Alone of those attending, the farmer's wife spoke in a throaty whisper, "It was the rage of a thing from hell what done this," she said, "and to hell the fiend has taken this poor man's soul."

Now I venture to say, even to this day, there be few if any who go in the dark to cross at that haunted spot over the old stone bridge, out in the loneliness of a moonless night on the trek of the Ring of Kerry. ■

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Nonviolent MANIFESTO

The altar of the badge

The neon sign across the street was dying, sputtering out a rhythmic, bleeding crimson that dyed the frosted glass of my office door the colour of a fresh arterial spray. It read M. VALENTINE – PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS, but tonight it looked like a warning.

I had my heels on the desk, a glass of cheap rye sweating into the varnish, and a head full of bad thoughts. The rain was hitting the windowpanes like a handful of gravel thrown by an angry ghost. It was the kind of night where honest citizens locked their doors, and the dishonest ones went to work.

The door didn't knock; it rattled.

She came in with the wind, smelling of expensive French perfume and cheap rain. Her trench coat was wet, clinging to a frame that would have made a bishop kick a hole through a stained-glass window. She had eyes the colour of a bruised twilight and a mouth that looked like it hadn't smiled since the blitz.

"Mr. Valentine?" her voice was a low, smoky purr, the kind cultivated in jazz clubs and back-alley speakeasies.

"The name's on the glass, sister," I said, not moving my feet. "Unless the rain washed it off. Pour yourself a drink if you've got the stomach for it. The rye's sour, but it kills the bugs."

She didn't drink. She sat down on the hard oak chair opposite me, straight-backed and trembling just enough to show she was human, but not enough to show she was weak.

"My brother is Leo Vance," she said.

I took my feet off the desk. The rye suddenly tasted like copper. "Leo the Lip. The slickest safe-cracker from here to Whitechapel. Word on the cobblestones is he got picked up two nights ago by the Fourteenth Precinct. The Hellfire boys."

"He did," she whispered, her knuckles turning the colour of lard as she gripped her handbag. "But he's not in the booking logs. He's not in the remand centre. He's gone, Mr. Valentine. And the boys at the Fourteenth just laughed when I asked. Inspector Grogan told me Leo probably hopped a cattle train to Liverpool. But Leo wouldn't leave without his tools. Or without me."

"Grogan's a comedian," I said, lighting a Player's cigarette. The smoke curled up between us, a gray curtain. "The Fourteenth Precinct doesn't lose prisoners. They consume them. For the last six months, every high-line grifter, cut-purse, and stick-up man who takes a ride in their black-and-tan wagons disappears. Meanwhile, Grogan and his boys are bulletproof. Last week, three bank robbers with Tommy guns cornered Grogan in a blind alley. They emptied sixty rounds at him. He didn't get a scratch. Walked out with a cigar in his mouth and three corpses behind him. People call it luck."

"It isn't luck," she said. She opened her handbag and dropped a heavy, leather-bound notebook onto my blotter. It was stained with something dark and stiff. "Leo pinched this from Sergeant Miller's coat before they threw him in the wagon. It's a

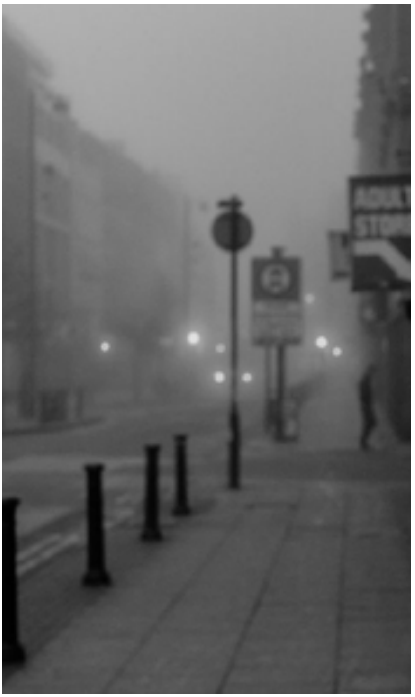
ledger, Mr. Valentine. But not for money."

I flipped it open with one thumb. The handwriting was Miller's heavy, brutal, Anglo-Saxon script. But the words weren't English. They were Latin fragments mixed with names. Criminal names. Next to each name was a date, a time and a symbol, a horned skull with a dagger through the eye. Leo Vance's name was at the bottom of the last page, marked for midnight tonight. Below his name was written: To the Lord of the Iron Marches. For the favour of the iron skin.

I looked at my watch. It was eleven-fifteen.

"You're asking me to break into a police station, Miss Vance," I said, blowing a ring of smoke that drifted toward her like a noose. "That's a one-way ticket to a pine box. The Hellfire Precinct doesn't just hold the keys; they hold the law."

"I have five hundred pounds," she said, her voice steady now,



hard as flint. "And I have a brother who wouldn't leave a dog in that cellar."

I looked at the ledger, then at the bottle of rye, then into those bruised-twilight eyes. A smart man would have taken the five hundred, told her to go to the commissioner, and then hopped the first train to Brighton. But I've never been accused of being smart. It ruins the complexion.

"Keep your money for his

bail, if he's still breathing," I said, reaching into my desk drawer for the short-nosed .38 Colt. It felt heavy and cold, like a lump of bad conscience. "If he isn't, use it to buy him some nice lilies. The white ones smell the best."

The Fourteenth Precinct sat on the corner of a greasy lane like a bloated stone toad. The green lamps outside burned with a sickly, jaundiced glare, casting long, greasy shadows across the wet tarmac.

I didn't use the front door. The front door was for people who believed in the Magna Carta. I went around the back, through the coal chute, sliding down into the grit like a chimney sweep with a grudge.

The basement smelled of damp coal, old urine, and something else, something sweet and heavy, like pork left out in the sun too long. It was the smell of a butcher's shop at closing time.

I kept the .38 low, moving through the boiler room. The pipes were sweating, hissing like a pit of adders. From somewhere deeper in the foundations, past the coal bins, came a sound that didn't belong in a municipal building. It was a low, rhythmic chanting, a heavy, guttural thrum that vibrated through the soles of my brogues. It sounded like twenty men reciting a liturgy with their mouths full of gravel.

I followed the sound down a flight of stone steps that hadn't seen a broom since the Queen died. The air grew hot, unseason-

ably hot, thick with the stench of sulphur and tallow candles.

At the end of the corridor was an old Victorian holding cell, its iron bars reinforced with heavy oak planks. The door was ajar, a sliver of yellow, flickering light cutting across the damp stone floor.

I peered through the crack.

It looked like a precinct meeting, if the precinct had been booked for an excursion to Gehenna. There were twelve of them, all in full uniform, their silver buttons gleaming in the candlelight. They stood in a circle around a massive, circular iron grate in the floor. Inspector Grogan stood at the head, his tunic unbuttoned, his face red and slick with sweat. In his hand, he held a heavy, ceremonial cavalry sabre, its edge gleaming like silver.

In the centre of the circle, bound tight to a wooden chair with heavy hemp rope, was Leo the Lip. He looked like he'd been run over by a steamroller. His face was a map of purple bruises, but those sharp, cockney eyes were still wide, staring down at the grate beneath him.

Through the iron bars of the grate, something was rising. It wasn't smoke. It was a thick, crimson vapour that seemed to have weight, bubbling up like boiling borscht. Inside the vapour, two eyes glowed, not red but a cold, oily yellow, like the eyes of a wolf in a headlamp's glare.

"Great Lord Azazel," Grogan intoned, his voice booming off the stone walls like a bass drum. "We bring you the flesh of the lawless. A thief who violates the peace of the realm. We give him to your fires. In return, give us the luck of the iron skin. Let the bullets turn to leaden dust upon our breasts. Let the blades dull against our throats. Give us the streets, and we will keep them clear for you."

"Amen," mumbled the other cops. It was a nice touch, the 'Amen'. It showed they still had manners.

Sergeant Miller, a brute with shoulders like an ox and a jaw to match, stepped forward with a heavy iron crank. He attached it

to a winch on the wall. The ropes holding Leo's chair were connected to a pulley system directly above the steaming grate.

"You blokes are barmy," Leo croaked, spitting a mouthful of blood onto Grogan's polished boot. "You're proper off your rockers. The Yard'll hear about this. You can't just drop a taxpayer into the plumbing!"

"The Yard doesn't have our luck, Leo," Grogan said, smiling. It was the kind of smile that made you want to check your throat for leaks. "Lower him, Miller."

The winch groaned. The chair creaked. Leo began to descend toward the crimson soup. The yellow eyes in the pit flared, and a sound like a furnace door opening echoed from the depths.

I didn't have a warrant, and I didn't have a plan. But I had six rounds of lead-nosed ammunition and a disinclination to watch a taxpayer get turned into a barbecue.

I kicked the door open. It hit the wall with a crack like a rifle shot.

"Evening, gentlemen," I said, levelling the .38 at Grogan's brisket. "I'm from the Board of Health. I've had complaints about the ventilation."

The chanting stopped so fast you could hear the candles sputtering. Twelve pairs of eyes turned to me. Nobody panicked.

That was the trouble with cops; they're used to people waving iron at them.

"Valentine," Grogan said, his eyes narrowing into two slits of lard. "You're a long way from your mouse-hole. This is official police business. State secrets."

"State secrets usually don't smell this much like a rotten brisket, Inspector," I said. "Tell your boy to step away from the winch, or I'll see if that iron skin of yours works on a close-range dental job."

Grogan laughed. It was a dry, rattling sound. "You think you can hurt us? Miller, show him the luck."

Miller didn't hesitate. He let go of the winch, drew his heavy Webley service revolver, and fired straight at my chest.

I didn't wait to see if I was lucky. I dived to the left, rolling behind a stack of old ledger boxes. Miller's bullet punched through the pine wood, showering me with splinters.

I came up on one knee and fired twice. The first round caught Miller dead in the throat. The second went through his breastbone.

He didn't fall. He didn't even blink.

He looked down at the two smoking holes in his tunic. Instead of blood, a thick, black oil was oozing out, smelling of brimstone. He grinned, showing yellow teeth. "Told you, private eye. The Lord provides."

"Great," I muttered, ducking as three more cops opened up. The basement turned into a shooting gallery. Lead was flying like hail at a picnic, smashing into the brickwork, chewing up the old boxes.

I looked at the winch. Leo's chair had dropped three feet, the crimson vapour already curling around his trousers. He was hollering like a stuck pig, and I couldn't blame him. The yellow eyes in the grate were getting wider.

"Valentine!" Grogan yelled over the din. "Give it up! You can't kill what's already bought and paid for!"

"I'm a democrat, Grogan!" I shouted back, reloading the .38 by feel. "I don't believe in monopolies!"

I didn't shoot at the cops this time. I aimed at the ceiling, specifically, at the massive, rusty iron counterweight of the old coal elevator that hung directly over the winch mechanism. It was held by a thick, frayed rope that looked older than the Magna Carta.

I emptied the cylinder into the rope knot.

On the fifth shot, the hemp parted. The three-hundred-pound iron weight dropped like a fallen angel, smashing squarely into the winch. The metal gears didn't just break; they exploded in a shower of sparks and broken teeth.

The sudden release of tension caused the main cable to snap with a report like a field gun. The whipping cable caught Sergeant Miller across the neck, taking his head clean off his shoulders. The head bounced across the stone floor, still grinning, before rolling into the corner. The body stood there for a second, leaking black oil, then collapsed into a heap of old blue wool.

The snap of the cable had another effect. It didn't drop Leo into the pit; the back-snap hitched the chair up, wedging it firmly into the heavy oak rafters of the ceiling, five feet above the vapour.

"My luck!" Grogan screamed, looking at Miller's headless trunk. "The circle is broken! The blood is fouled!"

The crimson vapour in the pit suddenly changed colour. It turned an angry, electric blue. The roaring sound from below became a deafening shriek, like a locomotive tearing through a greenhouse. The yellow eyes glared at Grogan with something that didn't look like favour anymore. It looked like a creditor who'd been handed a bad cheque.

The blue vapour didn't rise; it began to pull. The suction was immense, drawing the candles, the loose papers, and the heavy ledger boxes toward the grate.

The remaining eleven cops started to slide. Their boots, despite the heavy hobnails, couldn't find purchase on the slimy stone.

"Hold on!" Grogan yelled, grabbing the iron rail of the old cell. But his hands were slick with sweat.

One of the dicks, a young fellow I recognized from the gambling clubs, slid across the floor like a curler's stone, screaming as he went through the grate. He didn't go through the bars; he seemed to dissolve into them, his body stretching like warm taffy before disappearing into the blue light with a sound like a wet towel hitting a wall.

" Valentine!" Grogan roared, his fingers slipping from the rail. His face was no longer red; it was the colour of a belly of a dead fish. "Help me! In the name of the law!"

"I'd love to, Inspector," I shouted back, holding onto the heavy boiler pipe with both arms, my legs dangling in the slipstream of the vortex. "But I'm a private citizen. I don't have the authority to interfere with a civic function."

Grogan's fingers gave out. He went backwards, his sabre clattering against the iron before him. He hit the grate, his uniform catching fire with a bright, green flame, and then he was gone. The rest of the Hellfire boys followed him like sheep down a chute, ten of them, all sliding into the ledger of the Lord of the Iron Marches.

With a final, earsplitting pop, like a lightbulb being smashed by a hammer, the blue light vanished. The vapour sucked back into the earth, and the heavy iron grate clattered shut, cold and dark.

The basement was suddenly very quiet, except for the hissing of the broken boiler and the sound of Leo Vance groaning from the ceiling rafters.

"Mr. Valentine?" Leo squeaked from his perch. "You still down there?"

"Yeah, Leo," I said, letting go of the pipe and dropping to the floor. My knees felt like jell-o, and my tongue tasted like an old shoe. "I'm here."

"Can you get me down? These ropes are pinching my circulation. And I think I've wet myself."

"In a minute," I said.

I walked over to the corner, picked up the leather ledger Miller had dropped, and shoved it into my trench coat. Then I found Grogan's cigar case on the table. It was silver, untouched by the fire. I opened it, took out a fat Havana, and lit it with one of the surviving candles.

"You know, Leo," I said, taking a long, deep drag that almost made me forget the smell of sulphur. "The Fourteenth Precinct is going to have an opening for an Inspector tomorrow. You think I ought to apply? I hear the benefits are supernatural."

"Just get me down, mate," Leo muttered. "Before the next shift comes on."

I looked up at him, then at the dark grate in the floor. The luck of the Hellfire boys had run out, but mine seemed to be holding. For now.

I went to find a ladder. It was going to be a long night and I still had to tell his sister that her five hundred pounds was going to be spent on dry cleaning instead of a funeral. ■

#savethechildren

The acid-rain case

The rain in London didn't just fall; it chewed. It was a chemical soup cooked up by the industrial stacks East of City, a toxic downpour that could stripped the varnish off a coffin and leave the brass handles pitted like cheese. By midnight, it was coming down in long, grey needles that hissed against the pavement of Commercial Road.

I stood under the canvas awning of a shuttered greengrocer's, a damp Player's cigarette glued to my lower lip. My name is Jack Kelly. I'm a private inquiry agent, which means I spend fifty per cent of my time looking for people who don't want to be found, and the other fifty per cent wishing I hadn't found them.

Ten feet away, inside a narrow, brick-lined alleyway that smelt of sulphur and rotted cabbage, was what was left of Arthur Pendelton.

It wasn't much. The downpour had caught him flat on his back. His bespoke Savile Row overcoat was a smoking puddle of black sludge. His features were gone, dissolved into a featureless waxen mask by the industrial-strength acidity of the storm. The rain had washed away fingernail scrapings, blood spatters, fibbers, footprints ...everything the boys from Scotland

Yard liked to put into neat little envelopes. It was a perfect forensic vacuum. A murder scrubbed clean by God's own solvent.

Inspector Bardwell of the Yard was crouching under a large, heavy-duty rubber umbrella held by a miserable-looking constable. Bardwell was a thickset man with a moustache like a wet scrubbing brush. He looked up at me, his eyes squinting through the stinging steam rising from the corpse.

"You're late, Kelly," he barked. "And you're trespassing."

"The invitation said eightish, Inspector. I had to see a man about a horse." I stepped into the alley, keeping close to the brickwork where the overhang gave a few inches of shelter. "Besides, Pendelton's wife paid me a retainer this morning to make sure he didn't get into trouble. I'd say I'm late for the contract, but right on time for the inquest."

"There won't be an inquest if we can't identify the cause of death," Bardwell grunted, standing up and wiping his hands on a handkerchief that immediately showed yellow scorch marks. "Look at him. The rain's eaten everything. No bullet, no knife wounds left to trace, no fingerprints. We don't even have a face."

"We have his watch," I said, pointing with my shoe at a lump of dull metal protruding from the bubbling sleeve of the coat. "Gold. It resists the acid. And look at the position of the arms. He didn't fall here. His hands are tucked under his chest, or what's left of it. He was dumped."

Bardwell scowled. “We don’t know that.”

“He’s a director of Albion Chemical, Bardwell. He doesn’t take midnight strolls down Commercial Road without an umbrella, even if he forgot his mind. Someone brought him here, poured a concentrated catalyst over him to accelerate the reaction, and let the storm do the housekeeping.” I took a long drag of my cigarette, the paper crackling. “It’s neat. It’s professional. It smells like Thomas Thorne.”

“Thorne is the biggest industrialist in the East End,” Bardwell said sharply. “He’s got the Home Secretary on his speed dial. You don’t throw accusations like that around without a leg to stand on.”

“Thorne doesn’t use legs, Inspector. He uses crutches made of other people’s misfortunes.” I flipped the cigarette butt into the gutter, where it died with a tiny ping against the acidic water. “I’m going to go ask him what he used to dissolve his partner.”

The offices of Thorne Industrial Holdings sat on the riverbank, a massive Victorian monolith of dark granite that looked like it had been built to withstand a siege. Inside, the air was warm, smelling of expensive Cuban tobacco and floor wax, a stark contrast to the chemical stench outside.

Thomas Thorne sat behind a desk carved from a single block of black marble. He was sixty, with hair like silver wire and eyes as hard and pale as North Sea ice. Standing next to him was his legal advisor, a sleek, rat-faced man named Calloway, who wore an immaculate three-piece suit and an expression of permanent disdain.

“Mr. Kelly,” Thorne said, his voice a deep, gravelly baritone. “My secretary told me a private detective was forcing his way up the stairs. I assumed it was a creditor. You’re far more annoying.”

“Arthur Pendelton is dead, Thorne,” I said, leaning against the doorframe and keeping my hands in my trench coat pockets.

"Found him in an alley off Commercial Road. He was having a bath in the rain. Most of him went down the drain."

Calloway stepped forward, adjusting his spectacles. "If this is an extortion attempt, Kelly, I suggest you leave. Mr. Pendelton's tragic accident is a matter for the police, not a disgraced former officer turning over rocks for a guinea a day."

"It wasn't an accident, Calloway," I said smoothly. "And the police are currently trying to figure out why the rain in that particular alley had a pH level of one point two. That's not weather; that's industrial waste. The kind Albion Chemical stores in the tanks at Barking. The kind Pendelton was threatening to expose to the Board of Trade tomorrow morning."

Thorne didn't blink. He reached for a crystal decanter and poured himself two fingers of scotch. "Arthur was a sentimentalist, Kelly. He thought a few leaked documents about run-off levels would halt progress. But progress is a heavy wheel. It crushes things."

"Is that your confession?" I asked.

"It's an observation," Thorne countered, taking a sip. "You have no evidence. The rain, as you so colourfully put it, has washed the slate clean. There are no documents. There are no witnesses. There is only a private detective with a wet coat and an active imagination."

"You forgot one thing, Thorne," I said, stepping toward the desk. "The human element. You didn't pour that acid yourself. You're too old, and your shoes are too expensive. You hired someone who knows the yard. Someone who had access to the transport manifests."

Calloway sneered. "Bluff. Pure courtroom dramatics, Kelly. You wouldn't last five minutes in front of a magistrate with this nonsense."

"Let's see about that," I said.

I didn't give them time to an-

swer. I spun on my heel and headed for the side door that led down to the refining bays. My gut told me the man who did the dirty work wouldn't be far from the source.

The refining bay was a cavernous, iron-ribbed hangar filled with the thrumming roar of heavy machinery. Massive copper vats lined the walls, bubbling with foul liquids that sent green-tinged steam up into the rafters. Catwalks crisscrossed the darkness overhead.

I hadn't gone twenty yards before a shadow detached itself from behind a storage drum.

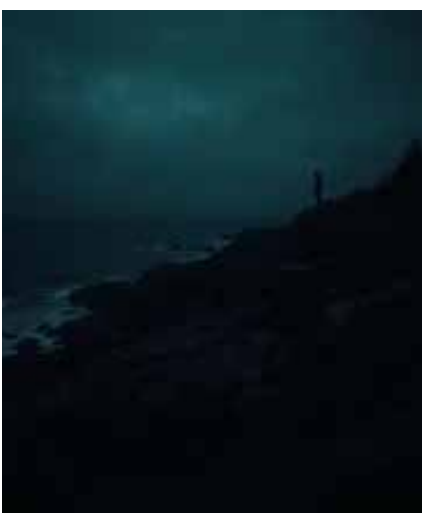
It was Silas Kelly, no relation, luckily, a brute of a foreman known around the docks as the 'Anvil.' He had a wrench in his hand the size of my thigh and an expression that wasn't friendly.

"Mr. Thorne says you're redundant, Kelly," Silas growled, stepping into the dim light of a gas lamp.

"I've been called worse by better men, Silas," I said. "Did you use a bucket or a siphon to get the acid out of the tank for Pendelton?"

He didn't answer with words. He lunged, swinging the wrench with a low, whistling arc that would have taken my head off if I hadn't ducked. The iron smashed into a brick pillar, showering sparks.

I dove low, driving my shoulder into his midsection. It was like hitting a brick wall. Silas didn't move an inch, but his elbow came down like a pile-driver into the small of my back. I hit the concrete floor hard, the taste



of copper and dust filling my mouth.

"You're clever, Kelly, but you're soft," Silas grunted, raising the wrench for a finishing blow.

I rolled desperately to the left as the wrench shattered the concrete where my skull had been a fraction of a second before. On my knees, I reached into my coat and pulled my Webley .38. I didn't shoot to kill; I shot the overhead steam valve right above him.

The pipe ruptured with a deafening screech. A blinding jet of superheated steam blasted directly into Silas's face. He roared in agony, dropping the wrench and clawing at his eyes as he stumbled backward.

He didn't look where he was going. His heel caught the edge of the unrailed catwalk above the secondary processing vat, a deep pool of untreated nitric acid waiting for neutralization.

"Silas, freeze!" I shouted, reaching out.

But he was blind and panicked. He took one more wild step back, lost his balance, and went over the edge with a choked cry.

The splash was loud, followed instantly by a violent, hissing eruption of yellow smoke. By the time I reached the lip of the vat, there was nothing but a churning, boiling froth. Silas Kelly had joined his victim in the great chemical beyond.

Ten minutes later, the door to Thorne's office flew open again. I walked in, my coat torn, a dark bruise blooming on my cheekbone, but my Webley was out and pointed straight at Calloway's chest.

Behind me came Inspector Bardwell, followed by three constables with their truncheons drawn.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" Thorne demanded, though for the first time, a hairline fracture appeared in his icy composure.

"Silas Kelly just took a dive into Vat Number Four," I said, wiping a streak of soot from my forehead. "But before he did, he was kind enough to leave his locker keys on the floor during our little disagreement."

I tossed a heavy iron key ring onto the black marble desk. It slid across the polished surface and clicked against Thorne's glass.

"Inspector Bardwell's men just opened Silas's locker," I continued, turning to look at Calloway, whose face had gone the colour of dirty skimmed milk. "Inside, they found Arthur Pendelton's leather briefcase. The lock was forced, but the documents inside are perfectly dry. They detail twenty thousand pounds in bearer bonds transferred from Thorne Holdings to Calloway's private account yesterday afternoon, along with the complete blueprints of the illegal waste-dumping system."

Calloway gasped, his eyes darting toward the window. "It was Thorne! He ordered it! He told me Pendelton had to be eliminated before the audit!"

"Silence, you fool!" Thorne roared, standing up so fast his chair overturned.

"Save it for the Old Bailey, gentlemen," I said, leaning against the desk and finally catching my breath. "You see, Thorne, you thought the rain was your accomplice because it destroyed the physical evidence. But you forgot the oldest rule in the book:

a crime driven by greed always leaves a paper trail, and paper doesn't dissolve in an alley unless you remember to burn it first."

Bardwell stepped forward, his heavy hand clamping down on Thorne's shoulder. "Thomas Thorne, Arthur Calloway, I am arresting you for the wilful murder of Arthur Pendelton..."

As the constables led them away in handcuffs, Calloway weeping and Thorne staring at me with silent, murderous fury, Bardwell turned to me. He looked at the wreckage of my suit and the blood on my collar.

"Not bad for a private inquiry agent, Kelly," Bardwell admitted grudgingly. "Though you ruined a perfectly good set of clothes."

"Don't worry about the suit, Inspector," I said, picking up Thorne's abandoned decanter and taking a long, well-deserved swallow of the scotch. "I'll just add it to Mrs. Pendelton's bill. After all, rain like this always costs more than you think." ■

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RICHARD STANFORD
The Informant
His notebook was full of shorthand transcripts of phone conversations. It had been one of those 'nothing-is-ready-days', panic to deadline, reporters lost in traffic. But they had managed to put the late edition to bed.
The Informant
by Richard Stanford

The backward step

The brass numbers on the dark mahogany wall read 2. I looked up the winding, cast-iron stairwell of the Sovereign Arms apartment building, and the next landing quite clearly bore a tarnished brass 4. There was no 3. The city records said it was a structural anomaly from a 1930 renovation, a simple renumbering after a fire. The city records, as usual, were full of polite, bureaucratic horseshit.

My name is Frank Thomas. I'm a private investigator, which is just a fancy way of saying I get paid to look into places where decent people have sense enough to keep their blinds drawn. My current client, a nervous little guy named Arthur Pendelton, had paid me five hundred dollars in rumpled twenties to find his sister, Clara. Clara was an eccentric amateur historian who had developed an unhealthy obsession with the Sovereign Arms. Her last journal entry, scribbled in a frantic, spidery hand, read: It's in the joints. You have to go back to see what's left behind. Hold the breath, reverse the blood.

I took a drag from my Lucky Strike, flicked the butt into a sand-filled spittoon near the radiator, and checked my .38 Snubnose. The weight of the steel against my ribs was comforting, though deep down, I had a nasty

feeling that whatever took Clara wasn't particularly afraid of lead. I stood at the base of the landing on the second floor, facing away from the stairs, looking down at my own scuffed wingtips.

"All right, Frank," I muttered to myself. "If you break your neck, at least you won't have to pay next month's rent."

I took a deep, lung-expanding breath, held it until my chest ached, and took my first step backward up the stairs.

The air instantly turned thick, heavy as wet wool. My heels found the edge of the first step, then the second. By the fifth step, the familiar scent of boiled cabbage and cheap pine cleaner from the hallway vanished, replaced by something ancient and sharp, the unmistakable reek of coal smoke, stale gin, and high-octane pomade. My lungs screamed for oxygen, a burning knot tightening behind my breastbone, but I kept my teeth clamped shut. I reached the ninth step, my heel catching on the lip. I stumbled, nearly losing my balance, my vision swimming with purple, amoeba-like spots. One more, you idiot, just one more.

My left foot hit a flat landing. I whirled around, exhaling in a long, ragged gasp that sounded like a dying steam engine.

The drab, peeling wallpaper of the Sovereign Arms was gone. In its place were deep crimson velvet panels, illuminated by the harsh,

flickering hiss of gas lamps and primitive electric bulbs. A long hallway stretched out before me, carpeted in a thick, geometric pattern of gold and black. From somewhere down the corridor, the tinny, upbeat rhythm of a jazz band drifted through the air, a saxophone weeping a frantic, Charleston beat, accompanied by the clink of glasses and the low, collective murmur of a crowd having a hell of a time.

I looked back down the stairs. The landing I had just left didn't lead to floor 2 anymore; it dissipated into a gray, swirling fog that looked like frozen smoke.

"Well," I whispered, adjusted my fedora, and unbuttoned my trench coat to give my right hand a clear path to my piece. "We ain't in Kansas anymore."

I walked down the hall, the soles of my shoes sinking into the lush carpet. The doors I passed were heavy oak, numbered 301, 302, 303. At the end of the hall, double doors of frosted glass stood slightly ajar. Painted across them in elegant, sweeping gold script were the words: The Blind Pig – Members Only.

I pushed the doors open and stepped into 1924.

The room was packed, choked with a blue haze of tobacco smoke that hung like a low ceiling. Men in sharp pinstripe suits, fedoras cocked at rakish angles, leaned against a polished mahogany bar. Women with bobbed hair, dripping in sequins and long strings of pearls, laughed loudly, tossing back amber liquid from teacups. It was a speakeasy, frozen in the height of the Roaring Twenties, vibrating with an intense, manic energy. But as I took a step closer, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. There was something wrong with their eyes. They were wide, glassy, and completely hollow, like the eyes of stuffed owls in a taxidermist's window.

"You're out of uniform, pal," a gravelly voice barked from my left.

I turned to see a mountain of a man blocking my path. He

wore a tuxedo that looked like it had been painted on with a broad brush, and a face that had stopped a few too many left hooks. His hands were the size of smoked hams.

"Lost my tie in the war," I said, keeping my tone casual. "I'm looking for a girl. Clara Pendelton. Short, brunette, probably looks like she doesn't belong here, mostly because she actually has a pulse."

The bouncer's face didn't change, but his right hand drifted toward the pocket of his jacket. "We don't like strangers asking questions. Especially strangers wearing clothes that look like they were made by a blind tailor in the future."

"Hey, this coat is a classic," I said. Before he could pull whatever iron he was packing, I brought my right fist up in a short, brutal arc, catching him dead on the point of his lantern jaw. It was a beautiful shot. His head snapped back, his eyes rolled up, and he went down like a felled redwood, crashing through a round wooden table and scattering teacups like ceramic shrapnel.

The jazz music cut off instantly, the saxophone dying with a pathetic squeak. The entire room froze. Dozens of pairs of those dead, glassy eyes snapped directly onto me.

"Frank!" a voice cried out from the back of the room.

Through the haze, I saw her. Clara Pendelton was tied to a

heavy wooden chair near the bandstand. Standing over her was a man in a pristine white linen suit, sporting a thin, manicured moustache and holding a silver-plated revolver. His eyes weren't dead like the others; they were burning with a frantic, desperate brilliance.

"Ah, the cavalry," the man in the white suit sneered, his voice dripping with theatrical malice. "A bit late for the party, Mr. Thomas. I am Julian Thomas, no relation, thank God. I built this place. I carved this floor out of time itself to escape the debt collectors, the cops, and the goddamn gray reality of the world outside. But a pocket of time needs fuel, you see. It needs fresh blood, fresh memories, to keep from snapping back into nothingness."

"Look, Jules," I said, taking a slow step forward, my hands held away from my sides. "I've had a really weird afternoon. I've walked backward up a flight of stairs, I'm nearly hypoxic, and I just ruined a perfectly good punch on your gorilla. How about you let the lady go, and we can all pretend this is just a bad dream brought on by some bad hooch?"

"I don't think so," Julian hissed. He levelled the silver revolver right at my chest. "You'll both stay. You'll make fine additions to the collection."

The crowd of dead-eyed flappers and gangsters began to close in on me, moving with a jerky, mechanical rhythm, like clockwork dolls whose springs were wound too tight. Their fingers clutched at the air, nails scratching like rats in a wall.

"Clara!" I yelled. "Hold your breath!"

"What?!" she shrieked.

"Just do it!"

I didn't wait to see if she complied. I dove to the floor just as Julian fired. The gunshot cracked through the room like a whip, the bullet shattering a mirror behind me. I rolled onto my back, drawing my .38 in one smooth

motion, and fired twice. The heavy slugs caught Julian square in the chest. He stumbled back, his white suit blooming with sudden, crimson roses. But he didn't bleed like a normal man; instead, dark, smoky shadows poured from the wounds, hissing like escaping steam.

"The floor!" he screamed, his face distorting as if seen through a funhouse mirror. "You've broken the seal!"

The crimson wallpaper began to peel away in great, burning sheets, revealing nothing but a howling, empty void beneath. The ceiling cracked, dust and plaster raining down as the geometry of the room began to warp and twist. The dead-eyed patrons collapsed into piles of ash and old clothes, their temporal shelf-life instantly expiring.

I scrambled to my feet, rushed over to Clara, and sliced through her ropes with my pocketknife. "Can you run?"

"I think so!" she gasped, her face pale as a ghost.

"Then don't stop, and whatever you do, don't breathe until we hit the stairs!"

We sprinted toward the double doors as the speakeasy dissolved around us into a cyclone of flying glass and splintered wood. Julian was gone, completely consumed by the vortex of his own dying pocket dimension. The hallway was shrinking, the walls closing in like a giant vise.

We burst through the frosted doors and hit the landing. The gray fog was boiling up from below. I grabbed Clara by the arm. "We have to go down! Backward! Now!"

We turned our backs to the descent, filled our lungs one last time with the collapsing air of 1924, and threw ourselves backward down the stairs.

It was like falling through a freezer full of knives. The wind roared in my ears, a chorus of ghostly saxophones and dying screams fading into a distant echo. The pressure on my chest was immense, a physical weight

trying to force the air from my body. My heel hit a step, hard, sending a jolt of pain up my spine. Then another. I held onto Clara's hand with a grip like iron, terrified that if I let go, she'd be stranded in the empty spaces between decades.

One more step. My heel hit flat linoleum. The freezing cold vanished, replaced instantly by the suffocating, mundane heat of a July evening.

We collapsed together onto the second-floor landing of the Sovereign Arms, gasping, coughing, and drawing in huge, greedy lungfuls of stale cabbage-scented air. The brass number 2 gleamed on the mahogany wall beside us. Above us, the stairs led straight to floor 4.

Clara sat up, rubbing her wrists, her hair a wild, tangled mess. She looked at the stairs, then at me, a slow, hysterical laugh bubbling up from her throat. "Frank... we made it."

I stood up, groaning as my knees protested, and dusted off my trench coat. I reached into my pocket, pulled out a fresh Lucky Strike, and lit it. The match illuminated the quiet, completely normal hallway. No jazz. No monsters. Just the dull hum of the city outside.

"Yeah, we made it," I said, taking a long, grateful drag. "But do me a favour, Clara. Next time you want to study history, go to the library. The late fees are a hell of a lot cheaper." ■

The IT bandit

Jim Thompson, self-proclaimed "Senior Cyber Solutions Architect" for Microsoft-slash-Apple-slash-Whatever-Pays, leaned back in his squeaky office chair, cracked his knuckles, and dialed another victim.

The phone rang twice before an elderly voice answered. Perfect.

"Hello, ma'am, this is Jim from Microsoft Security," he said, oozing fake concern. "We've detected severe malware on your computer. Hackers from Ukraine are stealing your cat photos as we speak."

A gasp. "Oh my Lord! What do I do?"

Jim smirked. Hook, line, and sucker. "Ma'am, I need you to go to your computer right now. Time is of the essence."

Cue the scam symphony.

* * * * * * * * * *

Jim's "office" was a dimly lit basement with a World's Best Hacker mug (stolen) and a half-eaten burrito (regrettable). His crew, Lenny "The Clicker" and Babyface

Benny, watched as he worked his magic.

"Ma'am, I need you to type totallylegitfix.com ...yes, all one word... into your browser," Jim instructed, stifling a laugh.

Lenny snorted. "Man, how do these people fall for this?"

Jim shot him a look. "Shut up, Lenny. You couldn't scam a toddler out of a lollipop."

The victim, bless her soul, typed it in. Jim's screen lit up with remote access. Jackpot.

"Now, ma'am, you'll see some scary warnings. Just ignore them. That's the hackers trying to stop us."

She whimpered. "Oh dear, this is like Mission: Impossible!"

Jim smirked. "Exactly. But with more Tom Cruise energy."

* * * * * * * * * *

Just as Jim was about to drain her bank account, a new window popped up:

"REMOTE ACCESS INTERRUPTED. FBI CYBER DIVISION TRACING CALL."

Jim's blood froze.

Lenny paled. "Dude. Dude. We're screwed."

Jim's fingers flew across the keyboard. "No, no, no—this is a prank! Some script kiddie messing with us!"

Then his screen flickered. A message appeared:

"HELLO, JIM. YOU'VE BEEN SCAMMING MY MOM."

Jim's stomach dropped. Oh no.

A video feed loaded. A muscular dude in a Hack the Planet shirt cracked his knuckles. "I'm gonna make you wish you'd stuck to stealing candy."

Jim swallowed hard. "Uh… Lenny? Benny? Run."

* * * * * * * * * *

The crew bolted like rats from a sinking ship. Jim's cheap dress shoes slapped against pavement as the hacker's voice boomed from his phone:

"YOU CAN'T ESCAPE THE INTERNET, JIM!"

Lenny tripped over a trash can. "I TOLD YOU WE SHOULD'VE STUCK TO PHISHING!"

Jim dodged a puddle. "NOT NOW, LENNY!"

A car screeched around the corner. The hacker? The cops? Jim didn't stick around to find out. He dove into a subway station, panting, his heart pounding like a drum solo.

* * * * * * * * * *

Jim thought he was safe. Then ...BAM! he smacked into a street vendor's cart, sending fake Rolexes flying.

The vendor glared. "You break, you pay, idiota."

Jim groaned. "Buddy, I am broke. That's why I scammed people."

The hacker's voice crackled from a nearby phone store's demo display:

"GAME OVER, JIM."

Sirens wailed. Jim slumped against the cart.

Lenny sighed. "Welp. We had a good run."

Jim rubbed his temples. "We scammed grandmas, Lenny.

There's no 'good' in that."

* * * * * * * * *

As cuffs clicked around his wrists, Jim sighed. The neon lights of the city blurred into one big failure.

The cop smirked. "Jim Thompson, you're under arrest for… well, being terrible at crime."

Jim nodded. "Fair."

Somewhere, a hacker laughed. Somewhere else, a grandma happily watered her plants, oblivious.

And Jim? He finally learned his lesson:

Stick to stealing Wi-Fi. ■

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POVERTY
HAS NO
AGE
GENDER
COLOUR
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NO MERCY

The last vintage

The rain on the windowpane wasn't water; it was liquid twilight, smearing the neon sign of the bar across the street into a bleeding wound. My office always smelled of damp wool and regret, a scent that clung to the threadbare Persian rug and the legal briefs stacked like unmarked graves. I was halfway through a glass of Akvavit that tasted of caraway and compromise when she walked in.

She didn't fit. Her trench coat was too expensive, her posture too straight for the slouching shoulders of my neighbourhood. She was all sharp angles and suppressed fury, a woman carved from ice and bad memories.

"Nils Håkansson?" Her voice was like the clink of fine crystal in a quiet room.

"The same. And you're out of your jurisdiction. This isn't wine country."

"I'm Lena Thorensen. My husband is Magnus Thorensen."

The name hit the stale air between us like a gavel strike. Magnus Thorensen. The Vengeful Vine-Grower. The man the entire city was convinced had finally

snapped and stuffed his lifelong rival, Aris Moreau, headfirst into a vat of hundred-thousand-dollar Cabernet.

"They arrested him an hour ago," she said, her composure a brittle shell. "He didn't do it."

"They all say that," I replied, taking a slow sip. "It's the line right after 'I want a lawyer.'"

"I don't want just any lawyer. I want you. They tell me you're a traitor. An ex-cop who defends the people he used to arrest. They say you know the… gray areas."

I let the insult, or truth, hang in the air. "A sin isn't always a crime, Mrs. Thorensen. And a crime is often just a sin the law managed to see. What makes you think I can help?"

She placed a single, crisp photograph on my desk. It was of her husband, Magnus, a man with the gnarled, weathered hands of a true vintner and the broken eyes of a defeated artist. He was

kneeling in his vineyard, cradling a bunch of grapes like it was a wounded bird.

"Aris Moreau didn't just crush his business," she whispered, the ice in her voice cracking. "He crushed his soul. For thirty years, Aris stole his ideas, undercut his prices, spread lies about his vines. He was a predator in a bespoke suit. But my husband… he's a creator. He wouldn't destroy Aris. He'd just want to out-create him. Drowning him in wine? It's too… poetic. Too obvious."

I looked from the photo of the broken man in the dirt to the fierce, desperate woman in front of me. It was the kind of case that stank of money, old hatreds, and front-page headlines. The kind that could get a man like me killed, or worse, disbarred.

"My fees are high," I said, finishing my drink. "And I don't promise miracles. I just navigate the fog."

A single, perfect tear traced a path through her expertly applied makeup. It was the first honest thing I'd seen all night. "Then navigate it for us, Mr. Håkansson. Please."

I looked out at the bleeding neon. I was already in it. The case was a vat of dark wine, and I was about to drown in it.

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The holding cell at the county jail smelled of sweat, antiseptic, and despair. Magnus Thorensen was a shadow of the man in the photograph. His hands, those artist's hands, trembled in his lap.

"I hated him," he said, his voice a dry rustle. "God, I hated him. But I didn't kill him."

"The prosecution thinks your hate did," I said, leaning against the cold bars. "They have a narrative. Simple, clean. You, the ruined man, finally get your revenge on the king in his castle. They love that stuff. Juries eat it up."

"What do you need from me?"

"The truth. The ugly, inconvenient, un-poetic truth. Where

were you the night Aris took his swim?"

He looked at the floor. "I was at my estate. Alone. Working in my study. I have no alibi."

"Of course you don't," I sighed. "That's the problem with the truth. It's often terribly uncooperative."

My investigation began where Aris Moreau ended: the wine cellar of Château Moreau. It was a cathedral of hubris, a vast, temperature-controlled space filled with row upon row of oak barrels, standing like silent sentinels. In the center, gleaming under a single spotlight, was the vat. A stainless-steel Leviathan, big enough to drown a man in.

The coroner's report was clear: Aris Moreau had been rendered unconscious by a blow to the back of the head, consistent with a fall and then submerged. The official theory was that Thorensen confronted him, a struggle ensued, and Aris fell in.

But the scene felt… staged. Too neat. The single, overturned glass. The pristine floor, save for the area around the vat. It was a still life of murder.

I started digging into the world of high-stakes viticulture, a world of soil analysis and sabotage, of stolen clippings and manipulated reviews. I met Moreau's long-suffering head vintner, a nervous man named Claude who jumped at the sound of his own shadow.

"Mr. Moreau, he was a brilliant businessman," Claude said, wringing his hands. "But his methods… they were not always traditional."

"You mean he was a crook."

"I mean he understood that winning was everything. Even if the wine itself was… secondary."

I also met Moreau's widow, Isabelle, a beautiful, cold woman twenty years his junior, who seemed more concerned with the probate of the will than the manner of her husband's death.

Her grief was as authentic as the paste jewels she wore around the house.

The break came from a place I knew well: the gray area. A former colleague from my days on the force, a detective who still believed in justice more than procedure, slipped me a piece of evidence the DA had "overlooked." A security log from the night of the murder. It showed a five-minute power outage in the wine cellar, a blip the initial investigation had attributed to a grid fluctuation.

But I knew the Château Moreau security system. It had a battery backup. The only way for the system to go completely dark was if someone had tripped the main breaker. Manually. From inside the house.

I confronted Isabelle Moreau in her sun-drenched conservatory, surrounded by orchids that looked as flawless and bloodless as she did.

"A five-minute window," I said. "Plenty of time for someone who knew the cellar, knew the vats, knew the man's habits, to set a stage."

She didn't flinch. "Are you accusing me, Mr. Håkansson? My husband was a powerful man. He had many enemies. The Thorensen maniac, for one."

"Magnus Thorensen is a lot of things, but he's not an electrician. He'd have just charged in there, fists flying. This was colder. Smarter. This was someone who

stood to gain everything."

Her smile was a thin, cruel line. "Then I suggest you prove it. Before your client rots in prison."

The trial was a spectacle. The prosecutor, a slick political climber, painted a vivid picture of Magnus's vengeful rage. He held up the bottle of prize-winning Cabernet—the very vintage Aris had stolen from Magnus years ago, as the motive. It was powerful theatre.

I bided my time. I let the narrative build, let the jury get comfortable with the simple story of the vengeful vine-grower.

Then, I called my witness. Claude, the vintner.

On the stand, he was a nervous wreck. I led him gently through his testimony about Moreau's business practices, his ruthlessness.

"And the night Mr. Moreau died," I asked, my voice quiet, almost conversational. "You mentioned to the police you heard an argument."

"Yes. From the cellar. Mr. Moreau was shouting at someone."

The prosecutor stood. "Objection! Hearsay."

"Your Honour," I said, "I'm not offering it for the truth of the matter asserted, but to show the witness's state of mind and the events preceding the incident."

The judge, a weary man who

had seen it all, overruled. "Get on with it, Mr. Håkansson."

I turned back to Claude. "Who was he shouting at?"

"I… I don't know. I couldn't see."

"That's fine. What did you hear him say?"

Claude swallowed hard. "He was yelling about betrayal. He said… he said, 'After everything I've given you? You'd do this to me? You're just like your mother.'"

A ripple went through the courtroom. I let it settle.

" 'You're just like your mother,' " I repeated. "Not 'you ruined my business' or 'you stole my grapes.' A personal, familial insult." I walked toward the evidence table and picked up the bottle of Cabernet. "The prosecution would have you believe this bottle is the motive. A business rivalry. But this wasn't about business. This was about family."

I turned to face Isabelle Moreau, sitting in the front row. Her mask of cold composure was still in place, but her knuckles were white as she gripped her purse.

"The security outage," I continued, addressing the jury. "It wasn't to hide a struggle. It was to hide the fact that the person who lured Aris Moreau to that vat, the person who struck him when his back was turned, wasn't a hulking rival vintner. It was someone he trusted. Someone who knew the breaker box was in the hall closet. Someone who stood to inherit a fifty-million-dollar wine empire. Someone he had just compared to her 'mother'—a woman he'd driven to bankruptcy and an early grave years before he ever set his sights on Magnus Thorensen."

I paused, letting the pieces click into place for the jury.

"The police saw a vengeful vine-grower and stopped looking. They saw the sin of envy, and called it a crime. But the real crime was colder. It was the sin of greed, dressed in black silk and wearing a widow's veil.

Magnus Thorensen hated Aris Moreau. But he didn't kill him. The killer is the person who saw that hatred, and used it as the perfect cover to get away with murder."

I didn't point. I didn't need to. Every eye in the courtroom was on Isabelle Moreau. The case against Magnus Thorensen didn't just crumble; it evaporated.

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Back in my office, the twilight rain was still falling. The check from Lena Thorensen was on my desk. It would keep the wolves from the door for another year. Magnus was a free man, his name cleared, but his soul, I suspected, would never fully heal. Some vintages are forever tainted.

The phone rang. It was my ex-colleague.

"Hell of a job, Håkansson," he said. "You proved Thorensen was a patsy. But we both know we'll never have enough to touch Isabelle Moreau. She's too insulated. Too clean."

"I know," I said, looking out at the city. "A sin isn't always a crime. And sometimes, the worst crimes are the ones that look perfectly legal from the outside."

I hung up and poured another Akvavit. I hadn't found justice. I'd just navigated the fog for my client. I was a traitor to both sides, living in the gray. I wasn't good. But tonight, I'd understood the difference. And for a man like me, that had to be enough. ■

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